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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism, which has been characterized as an outgrowth of or reaction to modernism, is more a form of questioning and a perspective than a theory or set of ideas. Although postmodernism resists definition, the following appear to be among its generally agreed-upon characteristics: questioning of all claims to absolute, universal truth; rejection of attempts to provide encompassing explanations; identity that is fluid, changeable, and derived from multiple discourses; loss of confidence in progress, rationality, science, and "objective" reality; recognition that perception is interpretive and inseparable from individual frameworks; and a view of power as a process that enables/restricts or promotes/discourages forms of practice or thought. The issue of whether adult education is embedded in modernism or postmodernism has been widely debated. Adult educators have been urged to engage with the issues raised by postmodern accounts of culture in the following ways: question how social relations are organized and what social visions are desirable; recognize their own and others' contexts, beliefs, and frameworks; focus on understanding power structures and foster development of alternative forms of knowledge; and consider themselves cultural workers rather than technicians engaged in maximizing efficiency. (Contains a 22-item annotated bibliography.) (MN)

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Postmodernism and Adult Education
Trends and Issues Alerts

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS
by Sandra Kerka 1997
ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
CELEBRATING 30 YEARS - 1966-1996

Postmodernism and Adult Education

Postmodernism is a term that is widely used in many fields, such as literature, art, architecture, history, and philosophy. By definition, postmodernism resists definition. However, some characteristics that are generally agreed upon are presented here with the understanding that this is a partial, working definition. Postmodernism is not a theory or set of ideas as much as it is a form of questioning, an attitude, or perspective. Seen as either an outgrowth of or a reaction to modernism, postmodernism may be characterized as follows (Bagnall 1995; McLean 1996; Rhodes 1996; Stanage 1995; Westwood 1991):

- Questioning of all claims to absolute, universal truth
- Rejection of "grand narratives" that attempt to provide encompassing explanations (including capitalism, Marxism, Christianity, science)
- Identity that is fluid, changeable, and derived from multiple discourses
- Loss of confidence in progress, rationality, science, and "objective" reality
- Recognition that perception is interpretive and inseparable from our frameworks, including language
- Knowledge that is contingent, contextual, and linked to power
- Value that is not intrinsic but is determined by choice, negotiation, manipulation, or domination depending on how power is used and by whom
- A view of power as a process that enables or restricts, promotes or discourages forms of practice or thought

To some, adult education is firmly embedded in modernism. Much of its research is grounded in technical, rational, scientific methods and the notion of self-directed learning assumes that individuals have autonomy, which postmodernism denies (Stanage 1996). Even emancipatory adult education can be viewed as another of the suspect "grand narratives" (Pietrykowski 1996). To others, adult education collaborates in what Briton (1996b) calls a postmodernism of reaction, which uses the rejection of absolutes to "'free' the market of all social obligation, 'liberate' individuals of their collective responsibility, subjugate social justice to 'individual free will'" (Briton 1996a, p. 29). This perspective justifies globalization, reengineering, pursuit of profitably, and development of "human capital" (Garrick 1994). Opposing this is a postmodernism of resistance, which takes a critical stance toward the status quo and resists the regulation of identity, which is a new and more subtle form of oppression (Briton 1996b).

Adult educators are urged to engage with the issues raised by postmodern accounts of culture in the following ways (Bagnall 1995; Briton 1996b; Edwards and Usher 1995; Pietrykowski 1996; Westwood 1991): question how social relations are organized and what social visions are desirable; consider how "the adult" is constructed in adult education discourse; recognize the contexts, beliefs, and frameworks of themselves and others; focus on understanding power structures and foster the development of alternative forms of knowledge; and consider themselves cultural workers, not technicians engaged in maximizing efficiency.

Print Resources

Bagnall, R. G. "Continuing Education in Postmodernity." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 13, no. 4 (July-August 1994a): 265-279.
Four postmodern tensions affecting continuing education are aggregation vs. fragmentation, consistency vs. flexibility, description vs. evaluation, and association vs. immediacy.

Bagnall, R. G. "Postmodernity and Its Implications for Adult Education Practice." *Studies in Continuing Education* 16, no. 1 (1994b): 1-18.
Tenets of postmodernism are the interpretive nature of perception and the cultural contingency of belief. Postmodernist adult education would be contextualized, indeterminate, expressive, participative, heterodox, and critical.

Bagnall, R. G. "Discriminative Justice and Responsibility in Postmodernist Adult Education." *Adult Education Quarterly* 45, no. 2: (Winter 1995): 79-94.
The modernist search for timeless universal principles of practice must be replaced by postmodernist striving for situational subjectivity, based on critical self-awareness and tolerance of others' beliefs.

Briton, D. "Marketspeak." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 28, no. 1 (April 1996a): 29-47.
Neoconservative marketplace rhetoric commodifies knowledge, learning, and culture for economic ends. The liberal-humanist tradition of adult and higher education is threatened by the consumerist mentality.

Briton, D. *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: A Postmodern Critique.* Albany: SUNY Press, 1996b.
Critiques the "technicist" trend in adult education and explores a postmodern approach of engagement.

Campbell, P. "Pedagogical Implications of Postmodernism in Adult Literacy." 1993.
Highlights the implications of three characteristics of postmodernism for adult literacy practice: discourse, representation, and difference.

Cunningham, P. et al., eds. *Constitutive Interplay Midst Discourse of East and West. Proceedings, International Adult and Continuing Education Conference, Seoul, Korea, May 1996.* Seoul: Chung-Ang University, 1996.
Includes "Post Modernity and Continuing Education: Becoming Critical Learners" (B. Down); "The Post-Modern Condition: Reformulating Adult Education Pedagogy" (M. Tennant); and "Traditional Modernity, Postmodernity and Communicative Modernity" (R. Flecha).

Deneff, B.; Schmitt-Boshnick, M.; and Scott, S. M.. "Adult Education in an Emerging Postmodern Condition." In *Adult Education: The Past, the Present, and the Future*, edited by C. Danis and M. Hrimech, pp. 253-257. Guelph: Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, 1995. (ED 394 010)

Suggests that the push to make educational programs more accountable (i.e., profitable) diminishes social accountability goals.

Edwards, R. "Are You Experienced?" *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 13, no. 6 (November-December 1994): 423-439.
"New right" governments may support experiential learning because of its role in developing self-disciplined and law-abiding citizens and consumers. Adult educators and trainers must understand and engage in debates about experiential learning and postmodernism to understand their own practices.

Edwards, R. "Really Useful Knowledge." *Studies in Continuing Education* 16, no. 2 (1994); 160-171.
In modernism, "useful" knowledge is emancipatory; in postmodernism, knowledge is exchanged on the basis of its value to the consumer. Its real value is tied to increasing the efficiency of the distribution system.

Edwards, R., and Usher, R. "Postmodernity and the Educating of Educators." In *The Canmore Proceedings*, edited by M. Collins, pp. 109-116. Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1995.
Adult educators need to recognize the significance of partial perspectives rather than embracing all-encompassing, universal narratives.

Garrick, J. "Postmodern Doubts and 'Truths' about Training." *Studies in Continuing Education* 16, no. 2 (1994); 127-142. Postmodern theory applied to training can lead to questioning how knowledge and values are determined in corporate contexts and how training contributes to corporate goals.

Jarvis, P. "Education and Training in a Late Modern Society." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research* 4, no. 2 (1996): 42-58.
Argues that education and training reproduce the values of their cultural setting and that these cultural values are relative and changing.

Jennings, L. E. "Prisoners of Our Own Perspectives: Recasting Action Research in Modern/Postmodern Times." *Studies in Continuing Education* 17, no. 1-2 (1995): 78-85.
Makes a case for using postmodern concepts in the reflection stage of action research.

Leirman, W., and Anckaert, L. "Moral Issues in Adult Education." In *Adult Education and Theological Interpretations*, edited by P. Jarvis and N. Walters, pp. 259-272. Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1993.
Postmodern shifts in the view of subjectivity and language may not necessarily signal the end of moral reasoning. Instead, a reorientation to the well-being of others becomes the basis for ethical reasoning.

McLean, S. "Continuing Education and the Postmodern Arts of Power." *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 7-26.
Postmodernism shifts oppression from overt forms of domination to subtle processes of self-regulation. Adult educators interested in social action must understand the new forms of power.

Pietrykowski, B. "Knowledge and Power in Adult Education." *Adult Education Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 82-97.
Examines contributions of postmodern social/cultural theories to adult education, concluding that adult educators should be aware of the connection between knowledge and power; individuals occupy multiple positions through which they construct a worldview; and adult educators should be aware of how power is deployed.

Randell, S. "Adult Education, Postmodernity and a Future." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Dallas, TX, November 199?. (ED 366 756)
Postmodernism influences the reinvention of organizations, careers, and the self. Adult education can provide the information and skills with which to understand the world, construct meaning, and create and recreate identity.

Rhodes, C. "Postmodernism and the Practice of Human Resource Development in Organisations." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research* 4, no. 2 (1996): 79-88.
A postmodern perspective in human resource development can either reinforce existing power structures or can recognize differences, develop alternative forms of knowledge, and create opportunities for all to have a voice.

Stanage, S. M. "Lifelong Learning: A Phenomenology of Meaning and Value Transformation in Postmodern Adult Education." In *Selected Writings on Philosophy and Adult Education. 2d ed.*, edited by S. B. Merriam, pp. 269-280. Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1995.
Explains the distinction between postmodern adult education, adult education in a postmodern world, and a postmodern definition of adult education. In postmodern adult education, learning is a process of fusing existing meanings with new possibilities.

Stanage, S. M. "Corporatizing Work, Education, and Democracy within Postmodern Praxis." In *Critical Perspectives*, edited by P. Cunningham et al., pp. 72-79. De Kalb: Northern Illinois University, 1996. (ED 391 943)
The postmodern lifeworld in which claims to absolute, universal value and truth are called into question is being exploited by corporatism. Human resource development is complicit in the "learning for earning" mentality.

Westwood, S. "Constructing the Future: A Postmodern Agenda for Adult Education." In *Radical Agendas? The Politics of Adult Education*, edited by S. Westwood and J. E. Thomas, pp. 44-56. Leicester, England: National Institute for Adult Continuing Education, 1991. (ED 338 905)
Engaging with postmodern accounts of culture can help adult educators consider how "the adult" is constructed and positioned and how learning and the learner are viewed in adult education discourse.

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